



STEP AHEAD NEWSLETTER

Spring 2021

From the Executive Director

Hello STEP Friends:

Spring is in the air! But, like me, you're probably still noticing some frosty mornings. Hopefully, with the change in weather, we're also getting closer to the opportunity to meet again in person, and to resume our trainings and workshops with non-Zoom audiences. Don't get me wrong, we love joining you in your homes remotely for online training, but seeing you in person, where we can hand out our signature swag and talk with you face-to-face, is something that we're all ready for. Even when we're "live," we'll continue to offer our services in a "hybrid" fashion to meet the needs across Tennessee.

We are well into our new grant cycle and working hard to continue to provide Tennessee families who experience disabilities with needed services and resources. This Newsletter is our second of 2021, and we sincerely hope it meets with your approval, and is beneficial to you. In addition to this Newsletter, you'll find lots of resources on our website and social media platforms. If you haven't followed us on social media, I encourage you to do so, and to sign up for our e-news too. You'll be the first to be informed of new resources, opportunities to give input into our work, and much more. We listened to your feedback and have covered supported decision making, eligibility, and how you can count on STEP for support and information. We're busy developing YouTube videos, Facebook Live events, and on-line "Coffee Chats," on issues you've requested and those "hot topics" we've seen bubbling up across our state and the nation. As you'll see below, we've been enjoying great success with a new grant funded by Amerigroup, to help bridge the technology gap for families by providing needed technology devices and services.

Since STEP has been recognized nationally as a leader in delivering content around transition from high school to adulthood, we've developed and are delivering workshops to other Parent Centers in our region to help them improve their outreach to families with youth and young adults who are striving to live their lives more independently. We are immensely proud of our Team's ability to provide these trainings. It's a win-win situation: when we expand our resources to meet needs in other states, our Tennessee families, educators, and youth benefit as well!

So much happening, and so much to look forward to. Please stay healthy and safe and remember you can count on STEP, so contact our Team at any time.

Karen Harrison

Executive Director, STEP, Inc.



Seth Leach studying

UPDATE ON STEP TECHNOLOGY EQUITY GRANT FROM AMERIGROUP

Following up on STEP's highly successful outreach efforts to reduce the digital disparity in our state, Amerigroup awarded STEP a second grant, for a total of \$90,000, to help families and individuals that experience disabilities connect to needed services and resources through technology equipment and internet access. A focus is on families or individuals living in remote or underserved areas, and those who've been financially impacted by COVID-19. The first 60 families or individuals supported represented an extremely diverse applicant pool, geographically, racially, ethnically, and in the type of disability experienced.

We were so pleased to get this lovely note from one of the families who benefited from this grant: "Our family was so blessed by this opportunity. We can finally offer our son a way to do schoolwork in other ways than just sitting in his activity chair for hours. Now he can change positions and get comfortable and still get his work done. We are so thankful that programs like this exist that allow kids not to just get through the hard things but to win at it all! Thank you SO much!" - *Shannon Leach*

TRANSITIONING FROM PEDIATRIC TO ADULT HEALTH CARE

Dr. David Wood, Kylee Phalen, East Tennessee State University

Transitioning from childhood to adulthood is a necessary yet complicated step for all individuals, especially those with disabilities or chronic conditions. During transition, adolescents and young adults need to develop a number of self-management skills independently, and then transfer to an adult health care facility with new practitioners in an unfamiliar setting. The idea of this can be overwhelming for many individuals. In addition, youth with disabilities and their families may need to prepare for and navigate the redetermination of Social Security Income (SSI), school transition programs, the ECF CHOICES program, and potentially supported decision making or guardianship.

Helping youth take steps to manage their health and healthcare encourages their autonomy, affirms their independence, respects their personhood, and works to ensure a higher quality of life. By taking charge of one's own health and health care, one develops confidence that will positively affect every area of life. It is important to prepare for the age of majority, 18, because at that age the clinic must provide an adult model of care and discuss health issues directly with the young adult, unless they give consent for others to be involved in their care.

While this all sounds great, where do young adults with disabilities and their families even begin to learn these skills and tackle these challenges? First, youth should assess their own self-management skills such as knowing their medicines and how to take them, being able to make appointments, or talking to doctors about their disabilities, and tracking their health issues. One helpful way is for the youth to fill out the Transition Readiness Assessment Questionnaire (TRAQ—see <https://www.etsu.edu/com/pediatrics/traq/>). This questionnaire measures the above skills and can lead to a discussion in which the pediatric providers or parent can educate the youth and help them set goals to learn these skills. One important next step is for the youth to talk to the doctor alone and try to practice skills such as making their own appointment or going to the pharmacist on their own.

Importantly, at 18 and 19 there are a number of other milestones, including loss of Medicaid and changes in disability/SSI eligibility rules as well as changes in school eligibility or possibly graduation. All of these life points should be anticipated and planned for well in advance of the age of 18. Youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) should be engaged in the high school transition services, which can help them learn vocational and self-care skills needed in adult life. In addition, youth with IDD, along with their parents, should decide if they need help making health care and life decisions, and if so, pursue some type of shared decision making.



Transition to adult care and adulthood is a complex, scary, but potentially exciting time of life, for both youth and their parents. To successfully transition, youth should learn a number of self-management skills and prepare for some key milestones that occur as the youth turns 18. With proper planning, transition can be both successful and rewarding for both the youth and the parent.

David Wood, MD, MPH is a professor in the Department of Pediatrics and Director of the Adolescent and Young Adult Clinic, East Tennessee State University

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REMOTE LEARNING FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

by STEP Staff Patricia Valladares & Dorca Rose Guayurpa

Tennessee has become an extremely diverse state. People from different parts of the country and world have moved here and are sending their children to Tennessee’s schools. In what we might call “normal times,” that wouldn’t be a big deal; schools have ESL (English as a Second Language) classes that help children who don’t read or speak English, or who are in families that routinely speak another language. Because of COVID-19, many of these families have to work from home and their children are schooling remotely. Language barriers contribute to these already challenging situations:

- All instruction is in English, and the parents are expected to give support and prompts to their students.
- Some families don’t have anyone around that can help with the English instructions and are often stymied by the technology.
- Use of the technology has not been adequately explained, and school interpreters aren’t available at all times to assist.
- The need for social distancing often doesn’t allow for teachers and interpreters who might be able to show them how things work to come into the home.
- Children with disabilities often have a more difficult time focusing on schoolwork on the computer. Where an older sibling might have helped in the past, these siblings are busy doing their own remote schooling.

Because we’re talking about minority populations, there isn’t widespread awareness of the barriers these students and families face, or how much these children are missing out on their education. Just signing in and being marked present doesn’t mean the kids are turning in their work, or even know what they’re supposed to do without a full understanding of the instructions. The greatest fear in minority communities - especially where there is a language barrier - is that their children will fall further behind academically. Here are some tips* that might help address the challenges you and your children are facing:

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| <p>Use Outside for Social Distancing. Ask if an interpreter can provide in-person assistance on the porch or another open area.</p> | <p>Computer-Generated Translation. Ask how to set the school computer to translate instructions; some translation is better than none.</p> | <p>Study Zone. Create a study place for your child that’s quiet and organized for learning. Have materials ready so the child is not distracted looking for what they need.</p> |
| <p>Reduce Distractions. Video and computer games, social media, television, toys, pets can create distractions! Make a list of the things that distract your child, then find ways to limit them during study time.</p> | <p>Calendars and Reminders. Try using a calendar and color code different activities. Mark spaces for homework time, assignment due dates, and other important tasks.</p> | <p>Recess at Home. Schedule time for physical exercise. Being in motion improves our ability to solve problems and pay attention, and can even improve our memory. Physical activity is also a great way to reduce stress and prevent anxiety.</p> |
| <p>Use Accessibility Features. Most cell phones, laptops, and other mobile devices have built-in assistive technology. For example, reading aloud or text-to-speech software can help children who have difficulty reading, and voice-to-text can help those who have difficulty with writing.</p> | <p>Stay Connected. Keep in touch with your child’s school and teacher through regular phone calls and email, if possible. Ask for a translator when necessary. It’s as important to your school as it is to you that your child progresses in his or her education.</p> | <p>Break Cards. Create “break cards” that your child can use when they are feeling overwhelmed. Give yourself a break when you need one, too. Take a breath, hit the “pause button”, or switch to another less intensive lesson or activity.</p> |

Celebrate your successes, even small ones. Remember, you can count on STEP!

**Portions of the above tips were sourced from www.understood.org*

BEST BUDDIES & BLUE CARE COLLABORATION

by Morgan Tansey, Program Supervisor, Best Buddies TN

Best Buddies is the world's largest organization dedicated to ending social, physical, and economic isolation of 200 million people with IDD. Our programs empower the unique abilities of people with IDD by helping them form meaningful friendships with their peers, secure successful jobs, live independently, improve public speaking, self-advocacy, and communication skills, and feel valued by society.

Within Tennessee, Best Buddies has partnered with Blue Care to connect Blue Care participants with the different programs Best Buddies offers. This includes our one-to-one friendship program for school-aged and adult participants, in addition to our integrated employment opportunities. Throughout the state, Blue Care has identified school partners in communities largely served by Blue Care. These schools have Best Buddies Friendship chapters that foster one-to-one friendships between students with and without IDD. Students with IDD are often isolated and left out of social activities, so these school programs address that issue and help students create an inclusive culture in their school communities. The Citizens program is for adults (18 years+) and supports the development of friendships between adults with and without IDD within the community. Many people with IDD have limited opportunities for social interactions after they leave the school setting. The goal of Citizens is to eliminate that social isolation and create a diverse community.

Many Blue Care and Best Buddies participants are connected through our Jobs program as well. The Best Buddies Jobs program secures jobs for people with IDD, allowing them to earn an income and work towards independently supporting themselves. Best Buddies matches skilled and qualified individuals with IDD with businesses seeking enthusiastic and dedicated employees. Through the Jobs program, Best Buddies develops partnerships with employers, assists with the hiring process and provides ongoing support to the employee and the employer.

Best Buddies envisions communities where people with IDD are successfully integrated into schools, workplaces, and communities. Through the partnership with Blue Care, Best Buddies hopes that we can serve even more individuals with IDD throughout Tennessee. The partnership specifically supports the expansion of three new school-based chapters, creating 10 new friendship matches in the Citizens program, supports the delivery of inclusive events, and provides disability awareness. If you are interested in learning more about school programs in your area, the Jobs program, or the Citizens program, please contact Best Buddies Tennessee at tennessee@bestbuddies.org.

MEET STEP'S NEW STAFF MEMBER: STEPHANIE WILLIS



Hi, I'm Stephanie Willis, Director of Content & Branding at STEP, Inc. As the organization's newest addition, my focus is on building community and expanding our reach to all who need us through engaging content creation and social media. When I'm not working, you'll find me...well, working. I'm "Mom" to a feisty six-year-old boy (Chase), three rescue dogs, and random neighborhood kids who show up for dinner.

I began my career in communications for a very personal reason: I have things to say about causes that matter to me. As a writer with a non-profit heart, I read mission statements and then translate them as the community might. When my personal summary of STEP's mission read, "Hey—Moms, Dads, kiddos—we've got your back," I knew I was in the right place. I am thrilled to be part of a team with so much passion, and look forward to telling their stories. I work out of my home

office in the Nashville area, where I also co-own a recording studio and production company with my husband, John. Feel free to reach out to me at stephanie.willis@tnstep.org.

WE ARE PROUD OF OUR STEP STATS!

Look what STEP accomplished in the past six years! We're in full training and support mode to meet even more needs in the future. You can COUNT on STEP!

Requests for Support

144,105



Website Page Views

294,551



In-Person Trainings

15,843



Social Media Engagements

1,545,765



IEP Review & Support

1,996



Multi-Media Trainings

65,026



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